"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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THE CITY CHURCH'S STAKE IN RURAL RELIGION

By Robert Grenville Armstrong *

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Some time ago I attended a conference between leaders of two denominations where the discussion waxed hot over a proposed merger of these two bodies. Finally one brother heatedly said, "You," naming the denomination, "have always looked upon us," naming his denomination, "as poor relations and you probably always will." Unfortunately that statement has been too true of the city church's attitude toward the rural church. Such an attitude, however, is not only not Christian, it is not gracious. It is an attitude of biting the hand that feeds one.

The city is under a great debt to the country. National security, prosperity and perpetuity are all linked into the continuance of the welfare of the man on the land. History has taught that in every era.

The city church is under a great debt to the rural church. Malcolm Dana says that seventy percent of those who join the city churches by letter come from town and country churches. What would become of the city church if it were not for this constant inpouring of new members, members who have been given a warmth of religious experience as well as a conviction that follows them into the teeming life of the city, and causes them to seek a continuance of that relationship with the Christian church? Malcolm Dana rightly says, "The flow is an evangelized one."

Furthermore, the lay leadership of the city church found its start and real strength of life in some small town or country church. Such a church as Center Church, New Haven, reports that of twelve officials of the church interviewed, all but one claimed his spiritual birth as within a country church. Seven out of eleven in Immanuel Church, Hartford, said that they came from a country church and added that they were proud of it. It is safe to say that today at least seventy percent of the officials of our city churches received their start in Christian life in some small town or country church.

When we turn to the leadership in the pulpit we see again a striking evidence of the debt that the city church owes to the small town and country church. In the very interesting, sometimes disconcerting, study published in four volumes, THE EDUCATION OF AMERICAN MINISTERS, Mark A. May in the second volume states that "twelve percent (of ministers responding to a questionnaire) spent their formative years in cities of 100,000 population or over; 25.6 percent grew up in towns and cities of 25,000 to 100,000 population; 14.4 percent in villages of 1,000 to 25,000 population; and 48.4 percent came from communities of less than 1,000 population."

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Is this debt of the city church owed to the small town and country church just because of a past contribution or must the city church still look to the small town and the country for the life-giving stream of new blood, in membership, in leadership, lay and clerical? Should the city church take account of stock, not within its own corporation limits, but out in the whole countryside? I believe that the city church must, for its own preservation and saving health, examine the springs from which its strength has come in times past to see whether they have become polluted through a neglect that ought never to have been allowed.

What of the present situation? We have heard much about the declining birth rate and its significance. It is asserted, and graphs tend to bear out the assertion, that the average age of the city population is steadily increasing, indicating a steadily decreasing birth rate that would keep feeding youth into the city's life. It can be confidently expected that before long the deaths will exceed the number of births in a great many of our cities as is already true in certain of our larger cities today.

What does this imply? It means either a dwindling of the city population or a much greater draining of the youth from the farms into the city streets. Dr. O. E. Baker, Senior Agricultural Economist of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, writing of "The Outlook for Rural Youth," says, "It seems likely to me that farm-reared boys and girls will be desired by urban industry and business in the future as in the past...."

Is the small town and country life of today producing boys and girls of the same fine character and high idealism as in generations gone by? Opinions differ. A writer in YANKEE, a New England magazine, gives a gloomy picture of what she found in one small town to which she moved from a city in order to have the sweet influences of country life. The reports of immorality coming from small towns and even the open country are disconcerting. The radio, the movie, above all, the automobile, have made possible a disintegration of life, along with the many advantages gained. The boy on the farm today can get to the bright lights after the chores are done. No longer is he isolated from the fast moving life of even the small neighboring city. Can the city depend upon getting the high grade stock of young people from the country that once flowed forth in such numbers to build our cities, to break down our frontiers, to create our great industries?

This raises the question, what can be done about it? Has the city a responsibility for the life of the country? Has the city a stake in rural religion? If the city is to look to the country for maintaining itself in the face of a declining birth rate that means a declining population, what kind of an increase does it want? Would it not be well for the city to concern itself mightily about the forces at work in the country, molding the lives of these potential citizens of the city?

Let us go back a bit to consider the kind of life that produced the boys and girls who have given much to the cities of their adoption. It was first of all a wholesome family life. The family, not the individual, was the unit. Individualism has little place upon the farm. The family life produced in its turn a spirit of cooperation, of team play that was wholesome and good. Young folks learned early that life was a cooperative venture in which each had a part, not a grab-as-grab-can sort of scuffle.

Secondly, at the time, at least in New England, when the country church was the strongest and most influential, its ministry was well educated, respected by the community, a power in the community. Church membership meant something.

Now it may not be possible to reestablish the old family relationship. I am not so sure that it is impossible. That will depend, I believe, upon a real and

an intelligent effort within the community to magnify the family and its opportunities for character development. The logical leader in such an enterprise would be the pastor.

But what is the situation with regard to the country ministry today? Referring again to the work of Mark A. May, we find that 20.3 percent of the churches are being served by men with both college and seminary training; 18 percent are being served by men with college training only, 11.3 percent by men with seminary training only, and 54.4 percent are being served by men with neither college nor seminary training. Then Dr. May makes a statement which rather riles me. He says, "This situation, however, is not as bad as it seems, because the 20.3 percent of the churches that are served by the graduates of college and seminary are, for the most part, the larger city churches, while the 54.4 percent of the churches served by the non-graduates are, for the most part, the smaller rural churches." "Not as bad as it seems!" How can we keep the reservoir pure if the streams filling the reservoir are polluted? We have already suggested that increasingly the city must look to the country for recruits if the cities are to maintain anything like a stable population. It is the country that is now providing, and will probably continue to provide, the increase in population or at least to keep the national population anywhere near stable. It is the country that will produce more children than it needs.

With life in the country organized as it is, the set of life for the individual is fairly well established by the age of sixteen or eighteen, the age, probably, when the boy or the girl would leave the farm to go to the city. The country pastor has a rare opportunity to know intimately and to influence profoundly the boys and girls of his community. He can put the stamp of his personality upon them in a way that will never leave them.

Not long ago an attractive young woman volunteered to take a class in the church school of one of our prominent metropolitan churches. That doesn't often happen, you know, not in the city. It intrigued the pastor and he inquired how it came that she did this. She told the story of the coming of an able, intelligent, well educated minister to her community where a larger parish had been formed. Before that she had had little use for the narrow, dogmatic type of religion that the poorly educated men who had served in the little church had given to the people. But this man won her allegiance, not to himself, but to the work of the Christian church, so that when she moved into Boston she naturally offered her services to the church. That church owes something to that larger parish up in Maine. In contrast to that I know a parish in New Hampshire served by a deeply devoted and religious pastor but with little education and a very narrow interpretation of religion. She gains the allegiance of her young people until they leave the community to go to the university or to the city. Utterly unprepared for an intelligent appreciation of a religion that appeals to the mind as well as to the heart, they are soon lost to the church and to the whole cause of religion. Has the city church any stake in the type of religion up in that little rural town? I say it has.

Because of this I would plead with the city to make possible a rural ministry of the highest type, men well trained, men of keen minds as well as warm hearts, men of vision, men of the John Frederick Oberlin type who count success, not in terms of this world's goods, but in terms of opportunity with the individual human soul.

There is a saying that once we had wooden churches and granite preachers and now we have granite churches and wooden preachers. It will take granite preachers to meet the changing demands of these rural churches, men who can face the discouragements of small congregations, of meager equipment, of wide-spreading parishes, thinly populated, men who will have judgment and tact, who can handle conflicting

personalities, men who will know enough not to "hang the fodder too high for the calves," men who will lift the dignity of the country church to new levels, making of them the preparatory schools from which the graduates will go to lead the lay and the clerical work in the great city churches that must depend upon a constant stream of Christian youth from the country or lose their life and vitality.

The city church, I say, must help make it possible to place such men in such places and to provide them with a support that will enable them to stay there for longer periods of time than has been customary. Short term pastorates are the bane of the small town and rural church. No man can get very deep into the life of the community in a three-year pastorate. Let him stay seven years at least and he will make an impression upon the life of that community which will never be forgotten. In seven years he can help a generation of young people grow from thirteen to twenty years of age, or from ten to seventeen years of age. What an impact he could have on those formative years!

Further, there must be an insistence on the part of laymen and on the part of pastors that Christian statesmanship shall supercede denominational rivalry, that no money be used for subsidies to churches just to maintain a denominational church where there is an over-churching in the community. I trust that God's mercy is great enough to forgive us the unholy denominational strife that has worked such irreparable harm to the cause of the Christian church. The self-supporting, contributing city church could do much to control this situation if its members, serving on Conference boards, would unitedly insist upon every effort to do away with overlapping competitive work, in favor of a united Christian church serving adequately the whole community.

In fairness to an adequate ministry in the small town and country church, funds ought to be made available to insure a man against the bugbear of the small salary, the unusual expenses caused by sickness or catastrophe. Why cannot we be as generous and as fair in our treatment of those who are doing real missionary work here at home as we are to those who go across the seas to carry the banner of the Christ? Why should we not have an educational fund to help with the education of the children of these trained men who are responsible for keeping the springs of our church life pure?

The city minister has a definite responsibility in this whole matter. There are men who have no time for the man from the small town or country church. If they pay any attention to their brothers in these smaller fields, it is with an air of condescension that does far more harm than good. If we are to have a ministry in these areas that is vital, then the work done there must be recognized as of as great importance as the work done in the city church, and the man doing that work must be respected as an expert in his field, not just a novice waiting for a chance at some important pulpit. There are men who have definitely elected the rural field who are doing a work their city brother couldn't touch. And they would grace city pulpits themselves. An exchange of city and rural pulpits from time to time is a wholesome thing, wholesome for both the churches and the ministers involved.

Instead of our denominational organizations passing out all the honors to the men in the financially influential churches, why not pass a fair number of them out to the leaders of these churches that are the source springs for the city churches, without which the financial resources would ultimately dry up? There is much that is not Christian in the way we measure the success of a man or a church by the dollar yard stick rather than by the character yard stick.

The city has a real stake in rural religion. The moral health, the spiritual vitality, the organized life of the city church, is dependent upon and will be increasingly dependent upon, the kind of morals, or spiritual life, of Christian character that is being produced in the rural church. If for no other reason, if only for its very life existence, the city must look well to the religious life of